

# An Ecological Analysis of Emily Dickinson's "The Grass"

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**Abstract**—As a burgeoning branch of applied linguistics, ecolinguistics mainly studies the influence of language on the sustainable relationships between human themselves, human and other organisms and even the natural environment. One of the most important approaches of ecolinguistic studies is ecological discourse analysis. For instance, the ecological analysis of natural poetry is bound to involve the hidden ideology and potential significance behind the discourse. Emily Dickinson, a famous poet in the United States, has written 1775 touching poems in her life, more than 500 of which are directly or indirectly related to nature and ecology. It has been discussed from different perspectives in the field of literary studies, but discussion from the linguistics perspective is still rare. Working within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics by M.A.K. Halliday, this paper tries to explore how the poem language expresses the writer's attitude and thought towards the nature through an ecological and linguistic analysis of Emily Dickinson's representative nature poetry—*The Grass*. The study shows that the poet's choice of language serves the meaning of the poem appropriately and that linguistic analysis of the poem can give implications for literary studies.

**Index Terms**—Emily Dickinson, ecological analysis, systemic functional linguistics

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense, ecolinguistics combines ecology and linguistics. British ecolinguists Alexander and Stibbe (2014) once gave a detailed definition of ecolinguistics: "Ecolinguistics is the study of the influence of language on the life-support relationship between human beings, other organisms and the physical environment. In other words, ecolinguistics focuses on how language forms, maintains, influences or destroys the relationship between human beings, other forms of life and the environment."(p.104)

One of the most important approaches of ecolinguistic studies is the ecological discourse analysis. For instance, the ecological analysis of natural poetry is bound to involve the hidden ideology and potential significance behind the discourse. Arran Stibbe (2015) divided discourse into three categories: beneficial discourse (such as nature poetry), ambivalent discourse and destructive discourse. This is the classification of discourse from the perspective of ecolinguistics. The reason why we want to promote, encourage and propagate natural poetry is because this kind of discourse reminds people to be close to nature, to love nature, to respect and to protect nature.

Emily Dickinson is a poet with strong artistic personality and regarded as one of the pioneers of modernist writers in the 20th century. Her poems are mainly about life, nature, faith, friendship, love and death. More than 500 of her poems are about nature. From the perspective of ecolinguistics, these poems belong to ecological discourse. She experiences nature carefully, observing everything around her, including animals and other forms of life. (Zhang, 2007, p.63) Through the poetry, she explores the relationship between human beings and physical environment and combines herself with the nature.

This paper is an attempt of ecological discourse analysis, which is based on Systemic Functional Grammars. The author tries to explore how the poem language expresses the writer's attitude and thought towards the nature through an ecological and linguistic analysis of Emily Dickinson's representative nature poetry—*The Grass*. The study shows that the poet's choice of language serves the meaning of the poem appropriately and that linguistic analysis of the poem can give implications for literary studies.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Broadly speaking, ecological discourse analysis includes the analysis of ecological discourse and the ecological analysis of discourse. The former focuses on the discourses concerning ecology. The latter concerns the study of the ecological factors in the discourse, which can be extended to the study of the ecological and non-ecological factors in the language system. (Huang & Zhao, 2017, p.585) By this way, they always complement each other and should not be discussed separately, even in this paper.

As an analytic paradigm with grand target, ecological discourse analysis is concerned about the positive development of the ecosystem. It needs to be rooted in the philosophical thought and cultural tradition, and should be based on the theory of linguistics. Specifically, the relevant theories of System Functional Linguistics (such as Transitivity Theory and Appraisal Theory) have been integrated into EDA practice. For example, Bednarek & Caple (2010) analyzes the environmental report of the Sydney Morning Herald of Australia by using the Appraisal Theory. Stibbe (2015) makes a

functional analysis of the process, role and modality of neoclassical economic discourse based on Systemic Functional Linguistics. He Wei and Wei Rong (2017) initially constructed the transitivity analysis model of international ecological discourse also based on the theory of systemic functional linguistics.

In general, this paper is an attempt of ecological discourse analysis, which is based on the Systemic Functional Grammar and follows the assumption that “Form is the realization of meaning”, with emphasis on the three meta-functions of language. According to Thompson (2004), each clause in grammar has three meta-functions at the same time: “we use language, mainly to describe our experience of the world, establish and maintain interpersonal relationships with others and organize our discourses.”(p.64) These three meta-functions express different meanings, namely conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. Halliday asserts to regard language as an integral part of society and even the whole living system, and he especially emphasizes the role and influence of language in environmental protection and degradation. Otherwise, according to Halliday, human beings recognize the world and interpret experience through language, at the same time use language to create meaning and to construct the world. Their behaviors and words are determined by relationships between themselves with other humans or other species in the ecosystem, even the relationship with nature. (Huang & Zhao, 2017, p.586)

### III. SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON POEM *THE GRASS*

American poet Emily Dickinson wrote more than 1700 poems in her life, though she has been isolated from the world since she was in her thirties. Thus it was not until a few years after her death that all her poems were discovered, collated and published, which gradually attracted the interest of people and the attention of experts and scholars at home and abroad. Some scholars found that Nature is one of the most important and major themes in her poetry. Frederick J. Pohl (2011), who points out that Dickinson has a wild love affair with nature and finds beauty, freedom, excitement and life in nature in his article *Emily Dickinson Controversy*. On the other hand, he also believes that Dickinson’s poems reveal the author’s scientific attitude towards nature to a certain degree. Song Xiukui and Zhou Qing (2007) deem that Dickinson’s natural poems express the ecological idea that mankind and nature live together in harmony. She proposed that human should eliminate the idea of “Anthropocentrism” and develop the inseparable aesthetics conception between human being and nature. Her work also reflects a strong sense of distress and an invaluable ecological consciousness.

The poem *The Grass* is selected from the first series of *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*. It is consisted of five verses: The grass so little has to do,—/ A sphere of green./ With only butterflies to brood,/ And bees to entertain, // And stir all day to pretty tunes/ The breezes fetch along,/ And hold the sunshine in its lap/ And bow to everything; // And thread the dew all night, like pearls,/ And make itself so fine,—/ A duchess were too common/ For such a noticing. // And even when it dies, to pass/ In odors so divine,/ As lowly spices gone to sleep,/ Or amulets of pine. // And then to dwell in sovereign barns,/ And dream the days away,—/ The grass so little has to do,/ I wish I were the hay! //

This poem revolves around the main theme of “*The grass so little has to do*”, describes the daily life of grass, and then expounds its elegant and glorious life. The first three sections are the author’s detailed and even elaborate descriptions of various creatures in nature. Grass, butterflies, bees, sunlight, breezes and dewdrops have all become the author’s companions, and in her poems they have become so beautiful and harmonious that readers can naturally feel their presence. All these natural objects are centered around the image of grass, in which the author depicts the pictures at day and night. During the day, the grass, butterflies and bees dancing in the breeze is very rhythmic. At night, dewdrops appear like pearls, glittering with beautiful light, and mirrored with green grass, It’s another beautiful scene. The sudden emergence of duchess in verse 3 takes the reader by surprise. “A Duchess were too common For such a noticing.” There was a lady of nobility emerging in the picture, but she did not know how to appreciate the beautiful picture or what was the beauty in the poet’s eyes. In the next two sections, the author writes about the postmortem beauty of grass, which is so elegant and peaceful. Dickinson’s imagination gave hay a good living space so that it had time to dream about the beauty of the past. The last sentence of the poem is the author’s feelings, “I wish I were a Hay” is the embodiment of her true feelings, the love and infinite pursuit of nature, but also the desire for ordinary and free.

### IV. ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

As was mentioned above, this paper is an attempt of ecological discourse analysis, which is based on Systemic Functional Grammars. Generally speaking, linguists who adopt this approach are interested in relating the various kinds of linguistic structure and patterns to the functions that language serves and to the social settings in which it is used. (Liu & Wen, 2006) Following the assumption of that form is the realization of meaning, this paper tries to chiefly analyze the meta-functions of the poem.

According to Halliday (2014), each clause grammatically has three meta- functions namely ideational function, interpersonal function and at the same time textual function, i.e. we use language mainly to describe our experience of the world and to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships and discourse management. Thus, we will analyze the poem *The Grass* from the perspective of three meta-functions and then reveal how the poet expresses her attitude towards nature through language and reveals its ecological outlook.

#### A. Ideational Function

The function in which we conceptualize the world for our own benefit and that of others is called ideational function. (Liu & Wen, 2006). It is consisted of experiential function and logical function. The former refers to the environment, the relationship between the participants and so on, while the latter concerns the information provided by the arrangement relationship between discourse, such as juxtaposition, twist, cause and effect and condition. The grammatical system by which experiential function is achieved is that of transitivity.

The transitivity system construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types, namely material process, mental process, relational process, behavioral process, verbal process and existential process. Each process has its own participant role. (Halliday, 2014) The material process refers to the “action”, which is the process of doing something and can express the unique behavior of the character vividly. Mental process expresses the psychological activities such as emotion, cognition and feeling, in which the participants are the perceptive sensor and the perceived phenomenon. Behavioral process refers to the process of physical activity, such as coughing, breathing, crying and laughing, in which the participants are the behavers. The relational process refers to the relationship between one object and another object or situation. The participants in attributive class are called the carrier and the attribute, and the participants in the identifying class are the identified and Identifier. The process of existence is the process of expressing the existence of something, and the participants are existent. The verbal process is involved in exchanging information through speech, and the participants are the speaker, the receiver and the content of the speech. Take an example: Those involving physical actions watching, dancing, cooking are called material processes. The ‘doer’ of this type of action is called the *Actor*: any material process has an Actor, even though the Actor may not actually be mentioned in the clause. In many cases, the action may be represented as affecting or ‘being done to’ a second participant: this participant is called the Goal, since the action is, in a sense, directed at this participant. (Thompson, 2001)

Firstly, from the angle of experiential function, there are twenty processes in the poem: nine material processes, three mental processes, four relational processes and four behavioral processes. From the perspective of the relationship between the participants and the process, the human character—*I* merely participate in one mental process (I wish I were the hay!). Obviously, sensor *I* and phenomena *the hay* are the participants. It means that I appear as an observer, stirring the awe of the grass, and finally producing an exclamation of praise. Relation to another character *the grass*, there are totally eleven process: seven material process (The grass so little has to do/ with only butterflies to brood/ stir all day to pretty tunes/ hold the sunshine in its lap/ bow to everything/ thread the dews all night/ dwell in sovereign barns); two mental process (make itself so fine/ dream the days away) ; four behavioral process (And bees to entertain/ The breezes fetch along/ And even when it dies, to pass/ As lowly spices gone to sleep) and two relational processes (In odors so divine/ Or amulets of pine). In terms of the type of process and the number of times it appears, *I* am just watching the dynamics of the leading role *grass* as a spectator.

From the point of view of the above experience function, we can examine this poem from two aspects from the angle of ecology. First of all, definitely, we can conclude that a typical kind of rhetorical devices—personification is used in this poem.

The bird is endowed with human attributes and is shaped in words as capable of acting like human beings. For instance, “The bird drank a dew from a convenient grass” can remind readers of a man drinking water from a convenient glass. By mental process, the *bird* is also described as having consciousness— “He did not know I saw”. Otherwise, the writer use the personal pronoun “he” instead of “it” to refer to a bird that underlines artistic portrayal of regarding animals as human beings.

As for logical function, what is involved is the semantic relations between two or more clauses. This function can be viewed from two perspectives: interdependent relation and logical semantic relation. interdependent relation can be divided into parataxis and hypotaxis. The former denotes reference, for example, in the sentence “Daniel says ‘My classmates treat me kindly.’”, the clause “My classmates treat me kindly” is projected paratactically by the clause “Daniel says”. Meanwhile, the latter can be comprehended through the example “Daniel says that his classmates treat him kindly.”, the clause “that his classmates treat him kindly” is projected by the clause “Daniel say”, and this clause cannot exist independently of the projective clause. It can be seen that the parataxis and hypotaxis are relative to the traditional direct speech and indirect speech respectively. Logical semantic relationship is expressed by expansion and projection. Halliday(2014) holds that in the form of projection, the function of clause is not the direct expression of non-linguistic experience, but the reformulation of language.

Throughout the poem, the interdependent relation between the other clauses except the last clause “I wish T were the hey” are parataxis and logical semantic relations are expansion. The use of parataxis-expansion mode is driven by meaning, because the theme of the poem is a series of my observation and description of the grass. In addition, the conjunction “and” is used for nine times, and mainly to indicate the connection of a series of the actions of the grass. For example, the use of the four “and” in first two verses is intended to highlight compactness and richness of daily activities of grass described in the first stage of poetry. It is certainly that the rest of the verses are for the same purpose.

### B. Interpersonal Function

The interpersonal function embodies all uses of language to express social and personal relations. This includes the various ways the speaker enters a speech situation and performs a speech act. Because the clause is not confined to the expression of transitivity, there are non-ideational elements in the adult language system. Interpersonal function is

realized by mood and modality. Mood shows what role the speaker selects in the speech situation and what role he assigns to the addressee. If the speaker selects the imperative mood, he assumes the role of one giving commands and puts the addressee in the role of one expected to obey orders. Modality specifies if the speaker is expressing his judgement or making a prediction. (Hu, 2011)

As far as the particularity of this natural poetry is concerned, we can discuss about interpersonal function of this work in different ways and could examine the relationship between Emily Dickinson-the writer of poetry, and the target reader. First of all, we can learn from the present study that Dickinson hasn't been a well-known poet until she died. At that time, she had a total of more than 1,700 poems, but only seven were published. She's almost isolated from the world. By this way, the relationship between her and the target reader is limited to kinship and friendship, not to the author and reader in the strict sense. From another angle, natural poetry such as this reflects the value, ideology, mode of thinking, attitude to life and living environment of the writer personally. Zhang Dongmei (2007), for example, argues that Emily Dickinson's another poem "A bird came down the walk" is an expression of the author's ecological thinking: "Human beings are only a member of the natural community, coexisting with other creatures in nature." (p.65) Of course, the same is true of this poem, which uses a personified technique to write the noble and free life of the grass, and to give a sigh at the end to express the inner reverence of the grass. The poem also reveals that other creatures in nature also exist as independent individuals, not because we humans can control them.

### C. Textual Function

The textual function refers to the fact that language has mechanisms to make any stretch of spoken or written discourse into a coherent and unified text and make a living passage different from a random list of sentences. Textual functions are mainly embodied by thematic structure (theme and rheme), cohesion (cohesive devices) and coherence. The theme is the starting point of the discourse; the rheme is what is said around the theme, often the core content of the discourse. (Hu, 2011) In Systemic Functional Grammar, theme can be divided into two groups: marked theme and unmarked theme. The theme is called unmarked when it serves as the theme of a small sentence at the same time as the subject of it. For instance, "The prime minister" is an unmarked theme of the sentence "The Prime Minister met with the leaders of other countries yesterday". However, marked theme refer to the condition that the theme does not serve as the subject of the sentence, for example, "what" is the marked theme of "What happened to you?". Cohesion occurs when the meaning of one component in a text depends on the interpretation of another component. There are mainly five cohesive devices, namely reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

This poem is made up of seventeen thematic structures. We can see that the known information-the grass acts as an explicit or probably implicit theme in almost all of the clauses. For instance, the theme of "The grass so little has to do" and "And bow to everything" is certainly "the grass" and "And (the grass)" respectively. While there are still three clauses do not use "the grass" as the theme: "The breezes fetch along", "A duchess were too common" and "I wish I were the hay!" In a word, since most thematic structures are about the grass, the information structure is relatively simple, and the new information is basically about the daily behavior of the grass. Otherwise, the cohesive devices in this poem are reference (such as "the grass"←"itself"), ellipsis (such as "And (the grass) stir all day to pretty tunes") and conjunction (There are totally nine "and" in the poem). Like the other types of discourse, the use of various cohesive devices in this poem serves the coherence of the whole text.

## V. CONCLUSION

According to systemic functional linguistics, the use of language is the result of choice, and the choice is driven by meaning. The reason why a particular text expresses a particular meaning is the result of the choice of speaker or writer. In many cases, the speaker's choice of language form is cautious, purposeful and conscious, because only by choosing the suitable form can the proper meaning be expressed; while in other cases, the speaker's choice of linguistic form is subconscious or even unconscious. However, whether the choice is conscious or not, it is meaningful for discourse analysts and needs to be studied.

This paper analyzes Emily Dickinson's natural poetry *the grass* from the perspective of metafunctions in the framework of ecological discourse analysis and tries to explore how meaning is embodied by language through discourse analysis. The ecological thoughts of the writer and her attitude toward the nature is revealed in the poetry: All things in the world are equal, they all have their own purpose of reproduction, development, prosperity and death. They would exist for themselves rather than regard the welfare of mankind as the ultimate meaning of their existence. (Zhang, 2007) Undoubtedly, Dickinson concerns about the nature sincerely, even though she does not simply call for the protection of nature and ecology as explicitly as environmentalists. We can clearly realize her ecological philosophy and ethic from her observation and description of animals: The human being is only a part of nature. All things in nature are spiritually and closely connected and equal. Therefore, anthropocentrism is counter-ecological and anti-natural. Only when people comprehend the nature, fear the life, love the life and improve the environment can they walk through the course of life peacefully and harmoniously with other life forms in the nature.

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